DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 007 PS 024 723

TITLE	Cycle of Sexual Abuse: Research Inconclusive about Whether Child Victims Become Adult Abusers. Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Crime, Committee on the Judiciary. House of Representatives.
INSTITUTION	General Accounting Office, Washington, DC. General Government Div.
REPORT NO	GAO/GGD-96-178
PUB DATE	Sep 96
NOTE	35p.
AVAILABLE FROM	U.S. General Accounting Office, P.O. Box 6015, Gaithersburg, MD 20884-6015; fax: (301) 258-4066; TDD: (301) 413-0006; e-mail: info@www.gao.gov (First copy is free; additional copies are $2 each; quantity discounts).
PUB TYPE	Legal/Legislative/Regulatory Materials (090) -- Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Adults; *Child Abuse; Children; *Psychological Studies; *Sexual Abuse; Social Science Research; Victims of Crime
IDENTIFIERS	*Child Molesters; Retrospective Studies (Psychology); Sex Exploitation; *Sex Offenders; Sexual Violence; Victimization

ABSTRACT

Sexual abuse can have negative consequences for children during the time of abuse as well as later in life. An important research question concerns the cycle of sexual abuse, specifically the likelihood that individuals who were victims of sexual abuse as children will become sexual abusers of children in adulthood. At the request of Congress, the U.S. General Accounting office completed a review and analysis of available published and unpublished research on the cycle of sexual abuse. Twenty-five studies were identified (the majority retrospective in design) that provided quantitative information relevant to the question, and their methodologies and results were summarized and analyzed. Although a number of retrospective studies found that a substantial percentage of adult sex offenders of children said they had been sexually abused as children, the majority of the studies found that most offenders said they had not been sexually abused during childhood. And although some studies indicated that sexual victimization in childhood may increase the risk that victims will become sexual offenders as adults, various design and measurement problems of both the retrospective and prospective studies precluded drawing definitive conclusions. Overall, the studies indicated that the experience of childhood sexual victimization is likely neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause of adult sexual offending. (Appendices outline the methods and results of retrospective studies of adult sex offenders of children and list the major contributors and research articles used in this report.) (KDFB)

United States General Accounting Office

GAO

Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Crime, Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives

September 1996

CYCLE OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Research Inconclusive About Whether Child Victims Become Adult Abusers

ED 401 007

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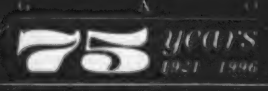

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United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

General Government Division

B-272972

September 13, 1996

The Honorable Bill McCollum
Chairman, Subcommittee on Crime
Committee on the Judiciary
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This is our third and final report responding to your request that we review and synthesize the current state of research knowledge on ways to prevent sex crimes against children. Our first report, issued on June 21, 1996, summarized reviews of the research literature on the effectiveness of treatment programs in reducing the recidivism of sex offenders.[1] Our second report, issued on July 26, 1996, summarized reviews of the research literature on the effectiveness of education programs designed to help children avoid becoming victims of sexual abuse.[2] This report summarizes the results of, and discusses the methodologies used in, the studies that have been done on the cycle of sexual abuse—that is, on the likelihood that individuals who were victims of sexual abuse as children will become sexual abusers of children in adulthood.

This report does not address a follow-on question that you raised concerning ways to prevent sexually abused children from becoming adult sexual offenders against children, because the existence of a cycle of sexual abuse was not established by the research studies we reviewed.

Background

Sexual abuse can have negative consequences for children during the time of abuse as well as later in life, according to several recent research reviews.[3] Initial effects reportedly have included fear, anxiety, depression, anger, aggression, and sexually inappropriate behavior in at least some portion of the victim population. Long-lasting consequences reportedly have included depression, self-destructive behavior, anxiety, feelings of isolation and stigma, poor self-esteem, difficulty in trusting others, a

[1]Sex Offender Treatment: Research Results Inconclusive About What Works to Reduce Recidivism (GAO/GGD-96-137, June 21, 1996).

[2]Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: Research Inconclusive About Effectiveness of Child Education Programs (GAO/GGD-96-156, July 26, 1996).

[3]See J. H. Beitchman et al., "A Review of the Long-Term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse," Child Abuse and Neglect, Vol. XVI (1992), pp. 101-118; A. Browne and D. Finkelhor, "Impact of Child Sexual Abuse: A Review of the Research," Psychological Bulletin, Vol. XCIX, No. 1 (1986), pp. 66-77; and D. Finkelhor, "Early and Long-Term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse: An Update," Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, Vol XXI, No. 5 (1990), pp. 325-330.

tendency toward revictimization, substance abuse, and sexual maladjustment.

In addition, researchers have noted that there is widespread belief that there is a "cycle of sexual abuse," such that sexual victimization as a child may contribute to perpetration of sexual abuse as an adult. Such a pattern is consistent with social learning theories—which posit that children learn those behaviors that are modeled for them—and also with psychodynamic theories—which suggest that abusing others may help victimized individuals to overcome childhood trauma. Critics have argued that empirical support for the cycle of sexual abuse is weak, and that parents are unduly frightened into thinking that little can be done to mitigate the long-term effects of sexual abuse. There remain many unanswered questions about the risk posed by early sexual victimization, as well as about the conditions and experiences that might increase this risk (such as number of victimization experiences, age of the victim at the time of the abuse, and whether the abuse was perpetrated by a family member). There are also questions about factors that may prevent victimized children from becoming adult perpetrators (such as support from siblings and parents or positive relationships with other authority figures). Answers to such questions would be useful in developing both prevention strategies and therapeutic interventions.

Studying the relationship between early sexual victimization and later perpetration of sexual abuse is methodologically difficult. If researchers take a retrospective approach, and ask adult sex offenders whether they experienced childhood sexual abuse, there are problems of selecting a representative sample of offenders, finding an appropriate comparison group of adults who have not committed sex offenses but are similar to the study group in other respects, minimizing errors that arise when recalling traumatic events from the distant past, and dealing with the possibility that offenders will purposely overreport childhood abuse to gain sympathy or underreport abuse to avoid imputations of guilt. A prospective approach—selecting a sample of children who have been sexually abused and following them into adulthood to see whether they become sexual abusers—overcomes some of the problems of the retrospective approach, but it is a costly and time-consuming solution. In addition, researchers choosing the prospective approach still face the challenge of disentangling the effects of sexual abuse from the effects of other possible problems and stress-related factors in the backgrounds of these children (e.g., poverty, unemployment, parental alcohol abuse, or other inadequate social and family functioning). This requires the selection

of appropriate comparison groups of children who have not been sexually abused and children who have faced other forms of maltreatment, as well as the careful measurement of a variety of other explanatory factors.

Results in Brief

We identified 25 studies that provided quantitative information relevant to the question of whether persons who were sexually abused as children were at heightened risk of becoming sexual abusers of children in adulthood. Of these studies, 23 were retrospective—that is, they began with a sample of known adult sex offenders of children and sought to determine whether they were sexually abused themselves during childhood. Only two studies were prospective. These began with samples of sexually victimized children and tracked them into adulthood to determine how many became sex offenders.

A number of the retrospective studies found that a substantial percentage of adult sex offenders of children said they had been sexually abused as children. However, a majority of the studies found that most offenders said they had not been sexually abused during childhood. These studies varied in terms of their estimates of the percentages of such offenders who had been abused, from zero to 79 percent, partly because of differences in the types of offenders studied and in how childhood sexual abuse was defined and measured. In general, because they had several methodological shortcomings, these studies offered insufficient evidence that being sexually abused as a child led directly to the victim's becoming an adult sex offender. The two prospective studies employed analytic methods that were better suited to establishing such a link than were the retrospective studies. Respectively, about 7 percent and 26 percent of sexually abused children in these studies were found to be sex offenders as adults. However, the various design and measurement problems of the prospective studies precluded the drawing of definitive conclusions from them as well.

Nevertheless, overall, the retrospective studies, prospective studies, and research reviews indicated that the experience of childhood sexual victimization is quite likely neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause of adult sexual offending. The two prospective studies concluded that the majority of victims of sexual abuse during childhood did not become sex offenders as adults. Therefore, childhood sexual victimization would not necessarily lead to adult sexual offending. In addition, the majority of retrospective studies concluded that most adult sex offenders against children did not report that they were sexually victimized as children.

Therefore, childhood sexual victimization would probably not be sufficient to explain adult sexual offending. While some studies indicated that sexual victimization in childhood may increase the risk that victims will become sexual offenders as adults, other studies found that many other conditions and experiences might also be associated with an increased risk. For example, one prospective study we reviewed found that children who were neglected were even more likely than children who were sexually abused to commit sex offenses as adults.

Scope and Methodology

We collected, reviewed, and analyzed information from available published and unpublished research on the cycle of sexual abuse. Identifying the relevant literature involved a multistep process. Initially, we identified experts in the sex offense research field by contacting the Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and Office of Victim Assistance, the National Institute of Mental Health's Violence and Traumatic Stress Branch, the American Psychological Association, and academicians selected because of their expertise in the area. These contacts helped identify experts in the field, who in turn helped identify other experts. We also conducted computerized searches of several on-line databases, including ERIC (the Education Resources Information Center), NCJRS (the National Criminal Justice Reference Service), PsycINFO,[4] Dissertation Abstracts, and the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse.

We identified 40 articles on the cycle of sexual abuse issued between 1965 and 1996. Four of these reviewed the literature in the area; of these, two were published in 1988, one was published in 1990, and one was published in 1991. Of the remaining articles, 23 presented findings from retrospective research studies, which began with a sample of known adult sex offenders of children and sought to determine (by asking the offenders) whether they were sexually abused during childhood. Another four presented findings from two prospective research studies, which began with samples of sexually victimized children and tracked them into adulthood to determine how many became sex offenders. Of the original 40 articles, we excluded 5 because they presented findings only, or primarily, on adolescent sex offenders against children, and an additional 4 because we were unable to obtain them.

[4]A database of the American Psychological Association covering the literature in psychology and the behavioral sciences.

For the studies in our review, we recorded the quantitative results, summarized the methodologies used, and summarized the authors' conclusions about the cycle of sexual abuse. Each study was reviewed by two social scientists with specialized doctoral training in evaluation research methodology. Conclusions in this report are based on our assessment of the evidence presented in these studies.

We sent the list of research articles to two experts, both of whom have done extensive research in the field, to confirm the comprehensiveness of our list of articles. In addition, as a final check, we conducted a second search of computerized on-line databases in March 1996 to ensure that no new research articles or reviews had been published since our original search in October 1995.

We sent a draft copy of our report for comment to the two experts previously consulted, as well as to one additional expert, to ensure that we had presented the information about the research studies accurately.[5] Their technical comments were incorporated where appropriate. We did not send a draft to any agency or organization because we did not obtain information from such organizations for use in this study. We did our work between October 1995 and August 1996 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Results Inconclusive About the Relationship Between Childhood Sexual Victimization and Adult Sexual Offending Against Children

There was no consensus among the studies we reviewed that being sexually abused as a child led directly to the victim's becoming an adult sexual abuser of children. However, some studies did conclude that it might increase the risk that victims would commit sexual abuse later. A majority of the retrospective studies noted that most sex offenders had not been sexually abused as children, and the two prospective studies showed that the majority of victims of sexual abuse during childhood did not become sex offenders as adults. The 4 review articles we obtained, which collectively covered roughly two-thirds of the 25 studies we reviewed, concluded that the evidence from these studies was insufficient to establish that being sexually abused as a child is either a necessary or a sufficient condition for the victim's becoming a sexual abuser as an adult.

[5]The two experts who reviewed the comprehensiveness of our list of articles were Dr. R. Karl Hanson, Senior Research Officer in Corrections Research at the Department of the Solicitor General of Canada, and Dr. Cathy Spatz Widom, Professor of Criminal Justice and Psychology at the State University of New York at Albany. The third expert consulted was Dr. Robert A. Prentky, Director of Clinical and Forensic Services at the Joseph J. Peters Institute in Philadelphia.

Retrospective Studies Varied in Groups Studied, Definitions of Sexual Abuse Used, and Results Obtained

We reviewed 23 retrospective studies. Appendix I provides additional information on these studies.[6] All but one of the retrospective studies focused on adult male sex offenders, and in most studies the offenders sampled were imprisoned or in some type of treatment program. However, these studies varied considerably in the types of child sexual abusers studied, whether control or comparison groups were used, and if so, the types of individuals in these groups.[7]

The retrospective studies also varied considerably in their findings and conclusions. The percent of adult sex offenders against children identified as being sexually abused as children themselves ranged from zero to 79 percent. This variation partially reflects differences across studies in how childhood sexual abuse was defined, as well as other differences in study methodology.[8] This variation may also reflect the differences in the types of child sex offenders studied. For example, both Hanson and Slater (1988) and Garland and Dougher (1988) concluded from their reviews of retrospective studies that offenders who selected male children as victims were more likely to have been sexually abused themselves than were offenders against female children.

A few of the studies found that sex offenders of children were more likely to have been sexually abused as children than were members of control groups composed of noninstitutionalized nonoffenders. However, many studies found that, when compared with other types of sex offenders (e.g., rapists or exhibitionists) and other types of nonsexual offenders (i.e., men incarcerated for nonsexual crimes), adult sex offenders of children were not necessarily more likely to have been sexually abused as children.

[6]R. K. Hanson and S. Slater (1988) and R. K. Hanson (1991) reviewed 14 of the 23 retrospective studies covered in this report, and 5 others. R. J. Garland and M. J. Dougher (1988) reviewed 7 of these 23 studies, and 2 others. L. M. Williams and D. Finkelhor (1990) reviewed 3 of these 23 studies, and 3 others. (See bibliography for full citations.)

[7]Some studies looked at child sex offenders defined quite broadly, while others looked at specific types of offenders (e.g., incestuous fathers, homosexual pedophiles, or heterosexual pedophiles). Some studies did not use control or comparison groups. Others compared sex offenders to men incarcerated or in treatment for nonsexual offenses, to men clinically depressed, to college students who dated minimally, or to law enforcement officers, among others. Seven of the 23 studies compared sex offenders to a control group of noninstitutionalized men drawn from the general population.

[8]Some studies simply asked study group members whether they had been sexually abused as children, and left it to the individuals themselves to determine what constituted sexual abuse. Other studies asked study group members whether they had been involved sexually as children, or before age 13 or age 16, with a person 5 or more years older than themselves. Studies involving incest offenders sometimes asked offenders whether they had been involved in incestuous relationships as children. However, these relationships may not have involved older adults or may not have been coercive in nature. Further, sexual abuse victimization experiences were not always limited to acts involving physical contact. For example, in one study, childhood sexual victimization included being solicited by adult males or females through words, gestures, or some other sexual approach.

According to several researchers, the relationship between childhood sexual victimization and adult perpetration of sexual offenses against children is complex and requires measurement and analysis of a host of factors. For example, it has been postulated that adult sexual offending is not simply a result of the experience of childhood sexual victimization, but also of other factors such as age at onset of the abuse, nature of the abuse, stability of the caregiver, and/or physical abuse.[9] Studies that collect data on such additional factors may add to our understanding of what types of sexual abuse, perpetrated under what conditions against what types of child victims, are associated with what types of adult sexual offending against what types of victims under what types of conditions. However, while such retrospective studies can help explore factors possibly related to adult sexual offending, they cannot establish the importance of these factors in predicting adult sexual offending. The reason for this is discussed in the following section.

Retrospective Studies Had Several Shortcomings

The retrospective studies we reviewed had several shortcomings that precluded our drawing any firm conclusions about whether there is a cycle of sexual abuse. First, the studies focused on known sex offenders of children (i.e., offenders who have been detected, arrested, or convicted, or who had been referred or had presented themselves for treatment), and these offenders may not be typical or representative of all sex offenders against children. Second, self-reports of childhood sexual abuse obtained from known sex offenders are of questionable validity. Known offenders may be motivated to overreport histories of abuse to gain sympathy or to excuse their own offenses.[10] Third, where comparison or control groups were used, attempts to match group members to sex offenders of children on factors possibly related to being sexually abused or abusive were

[9]See, for example, R. A. Prentky and R. A. Knight, "Age of Onset of Sexual Assault: Criminal and Life History Correlates," in Sexual Aggression: Issues in Etiology, Assessment, and Treatment, eds. G. C. N. Hall, R. Hirschman, J. R. Graham, and M. S. Zaragoza (Washington, D.C.: Taylor and Francis, 1993), pp. 43-62; and R. A. Prentky et al., "Developmental Antecedents of Sexual Aggression," Development and Psychopathology, Vol. I (1989), pp. 153-169.

[10]One research study suggested that some sex offenders may claim to have been victims of child sexual abuse when they were not. See: Jan Hindman, "Research Disputes and Assumptions about Child Molesters," National District Attorney Association Bulletin, Vol. VII, No. 4 (1988), pp. 1-3. Hindman studied convicted adult child molesters treated at an Oregon clinic between 1980 and 1988. Offenders were required to write a detailed sexual history, including information on whether they were abused as children. Since 1982, offenders have also been told that they will be subject to polygraph testing, that their written autobiography must conform with the polygraph test, and that they will be sent back to jail if they do not pass the test. A higher percentage of offenders who wrote their sexual histories before the polygraph requirement was instituted in 1982 claimed that they had been sexually victimized as children (67 percent) than of those who were told that their sexual histories would have to conform with the polygraph test (29 percent).

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typically limited; few of the studies attempted to control for such factors statistically.

Finally, one of the major shortcomings of these retrospective studies is that they cannot reveal how likely it is that a person who has been sexually abused as a child will become a sexual abuser in adulthood. For example, even if 100 percent of sexual abusers of children were sexually abused as children, this would not necessarily mean that sexual abuse causes abused children to become abusers themselves. It may be that only a small percentage of sexually abused children become sex offenders against children. Determining how likely victims of childhood sexual abuse are to become adult sex offenders requires that a sample of sexually abused children be followed forward in time, rather than the histories of sex offenders be traced backward.

Prospective Studies Used Better Methodologies, but Results Were Inconclusive

Our review of the literature identified two research studies (described in four articles) that have used a prospective approach in examining the cycle of sexual abuse. One of these studies is part of a larger study of the cycle of violence.[11]

Widom is the primary researcher in the larger study, which is still ongoing. It involves a cohort of 908 substantiated cases of child abuse (physical and/or sexual) or neglect processed through the courts between 1967 and 1971.[12] These abuse/neglect cases were restricted to children who were 11 years of age or younger at the time of the abuse or neglect incident. They included 153 sexually abused children, 160 physically abused children, and

[11]On the cycle of sexual abuse, see C. S. Widom and M. A. Ames, 1994; C. S. Widom, 1995; and C. S. Widom, 1996. On the cycle of violence generally, see M. G. Maxfield and Cathy Spatz Widom, "The Cycle of Violence: Revisited Six Years Later," Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine (April, 1996); Cathy Spatz Widom, The Cycle of Violence: Research in Brief (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, October 1992); Cathy Spatz Widom, "Child Abuse, Neglect, and Adult Behavior: Research Design and Findings on Criminality, Violence, and Child Abuse," American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, Vol. LIX (1989), pp. 355-367; Cathy Spatz Widom, "The Cycle of Violence," Science, Vol. CCXLIV (1989), pp. 160-166; and Cathy Spatz Widom, "Does Violence Beget Violence?: A Critical Examination of the Literature," Psychological Bulletin, Vol. CVI (1989), pp. 3-28.

[12]The study has relied on the official records of agencies that handled these cases. Detailed information about the abuse and/or neglect incident and family composition and characteristics was obtained from the files of the juvenile court and probation department, the authority responsible for cases of abused, neglected, or dependent and delinquent children. The records of the sexual abuse cases were obtained from the juvenile court and from the adult criminal court of a metropolitan area in the Midwest. If there was evidence in the records that the charges of sexual abuse had been investigated and found to be true, the case was coded as involving sexual abuse.

697 neglected children.[13] This prospective study also includes a control group of 667 individuals who had no record of abuse or neglect and who were either born in the same hospitals or attended the same elementary schools as the abused children. The control and study group members were matched on sex, age, race, and approximate family socioeconomic status.

Local, state, and federal official arrest records containing information recorded up to June 1994 were used to determine how many of the study and control group members were arrested for sex offenses. Table 1 shows results pertaining to sex offenses from the most recent analyses based on this larger study.[14] The study did not distinguish whether the sex offense was perpetrated against a child or an adult.[15]

Table 1: Results From the Research of Widom and Colleagues on the Cycle of Sexual Abuse

	Sexually abused (N = 153)		Physically abused (N = 160)		Neglected (N = 697)		Controls (N = 667)	
Adult arrests	**Odds ratio[a]**	**Percent**	**Odds ratio[a]**	**Percent**	**Odds ratio[a]**	**Percent**	**Odds ratio[a]**	**Percent**
Any sex crime[b]	1.4	6.5%	1.4	11.0%	2.1	13.1%	Not applicable	6.0%
Prostitution	3.7*	3.9%	0.9	1.4%	5.0*	3.6%	Not applicable	0.6%
Rape or sodomy[c]	1.9	4.2%	2.4	4.7%	1.8	3.6%	Not applicable	2.1%

Note 1: When criminal history checks were conducted in 1994, fewer than 1 percent of the individuals in the sample were under 25 years of age.

Note 2: An asterisk (*) denotes statistical significance.

[a]Odds ratios reflect the differences between groups in the odds or likelihood of becoming a sex offender. For example, an odds ratio of 1.4 indicates that sexually abused children are nearly 1-1/2 times as likely as children in the control group to become adult sex offenders. Odds ratios are based on logistic regression analysis, with all three types of abuse in the equation (comparisons are with controls). These equations also control for age, sex, and race.

[b]Sex crimes include prostitution, incest, child molestation, rape, sodomy, assault and battery with intent to gratify, peeping, public indecency, criminal deviant conduct, and contributing to the delinquency of a minor.

[c]Percentages and odds ratios are for males only.

Source: Data provided by C.S. Widom, 1996.

[13]Some individuals in each of these groups experienced more than one type of maltreatment. Thus, the numbers add up to more than 908 individuals.

[14]C. S. Widom, 1996; C. S. Widom, personal communication.

[15]To strengthen the study, Widom is extending data collection in a number of ways. Future analyses will include participant self-report data, which will allow corroboration of the results from official arrest data and potentially provide more precise information on the nature of the sex offenses committed (i.e., whether they involve child or minor victims, etc.).

Compared to the control group, a higher percentage of those who had been sexually abused, physically abused, or neglected as children were arrested as adults for any sex crime, for prostitution, and (among males) for rape or sodomy. To determine how different the study groups were from the control group, Widom statistically controlled for such differences between the groups as age, race, and sex; calculated odds ratios; and performed statistical tests. The results indicated that the differences between the sexually abused group and the control group in the odds of arrest for any sex crime or for rape or sodomy separately were not statistically significant. Sexually abused children were significantly more likely to have been arrested for prostitution, however. Twenty-three to 27 years later, sexually abused children were nearly four times more likely to have been arrested for prostitution. On the other hand, members of the childhood neglect study group were significantly more likely than members of the control group to have been arrested for any sex crime or for prostitution.

Because it could allow researchers to discern the likelihood of victims becoming abusers, the prospective approach is methodologically superior to the retrospective approach. Widom's study, however, has several limitations. First, published work from the study has so far relied solely on official arrest data, which may fail to identify some offenders (those who avoid detection or arrest).[16] Second, the study groups of victimized children were identified by using records of substantiated cases of abuse or neglect that were processed through the state courts. Such cases may represent only the most severe instances of abuse and may not be generalizable to all children who have been abused or neglected.[17] Finally,

[16]We noted in footnote 15 that Widom is undertaking new analyses that will make use of self-report data on commission of sex offenses to supplement official arrest data.

[17]Abuse and/or neglect cases that are substantiated at the court level may not be representative of all cases because over half of child maltreatment reports are not substantiated by social services investigators, and the vast majority of cases substantiated by local or county departments of social services never reach the court level. (See J. Leiter, K. A. Myers, and M. Zingraff, "Substantiated and Unsubstantiated Cases of Child Maltreatment: Do Their Consequences Differ?" Social Work Research, Vol. XVIII, No. 2 (June 1994), pp. 67-82; and M. T. Zingraff et al., "Child Maltreatment and Youthful Problem Behavior," Criminology, Vol. XXXI, No. 2 (May 1993), pp. 173-202.) In addition, Widom states that the cases included in her study were processed before the child abuse reporting laws were passed, and many cases of sexual abuse were not reported. Some researchers have suggested using all substantiated reports of abuse and neglect (not just those that reach the court level), or including unsubstantiated reports, in research on the consequences of abuse and neglect. However, Widom has warned that using unsubstantiated reports might introduce bias because these reports leave open the question of whether abuse or neglect actually occurred and are likely to be biased toward the less serious end of the continuum. (See C.S. Widom, "Sampling Bias and Implications for Child Abuse Research," American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, Vol. LVIII (1988), pp. 260-270.) Furthermore, if prospective studies find little support for the cycle of sex abuse among the most severe cases—those that have been substantiated at the court level—it is not likely that strong support for such a relationship will be found using less severe cases.

the number of sexually abused males in the abused/neglected sample was small (a total of 24). Statistical comparisons based on small numbers of cases should be interpreted with caution, since small sample sizes may not yield reliable estimates.

We located one other study that used a prospective design and followed sexually victimized children into early adulthood. This study sampled 147 boys under the age of 14 who were seen in the emergency room of an urban hospital because of sexual abuse between 1971 and 1975.[18] The researchers also collected data on a comparison sample of boys of the same race and roughly the same age who were seen in the same emergency room at roughly the same time for reasons other than sexual abuse. In the period 1992 to 1994, official juvenile and adult arrest records for the entire victim and comparison sample were collected, and the researchers attempted to locate and interview as many of the men as possible.[19] Fifty of the 147 boys in the victim sample, and 56 of the 147 boys in the comparison sample, were interviewed. They were asked to self-report instances of sex-offending, and were also asked a number of other questions about their family of origin, sexual history, history of sexual victimization, psychological functioning, drug and alcohol use, and criminal behavior.[20]

As shown in table 2, the study found little difference between the victim and comparison samples in the percentages that were arrested for, or that self-reported, sex offenses. According to the researchers, one explanation for this finding is that the victim and comparison samples are not as different as originally intended with respect to their having been victims of child sexual abuse. For instance, in the comparison group, 40 percent of the 56 men interviewed reported that they had themselves been sexually abused. Furthermore, 55 percent of the men in the victim sample did not recall, or at least did not report to interviewers, that they had been sexually abused. When the researchers reanalyzed the data and compared all victims (from both the victim sample and the comparison sample) with

[18]L. M. Williams et al., 1995.

[19]The researchers checked official arrest records from the city's juvenile court, its adult probation department, and the National Criminal Information Center. Sex offenses included rape, involuntary deviate sexual intercourse, sexual assault, indecent assault, indecent exposure, and incest. It appears that arrest records were examined for all members of the victim and comparison sample. However, Williams et al. only present arrest information for sample members who were located and interviewed.

[20]In an effort to protect men who did not remember childhood abuse that had occurred or might not want others to know about it, the researchers did not reveal the fact of childhood victimization to men who did not bring it up on their own. Study group members were told that they had been selected for a follow-up study of men who received emergency room services in the hospital in the early 1970s.

the remaining nonvictimized members of the comparison group, they did not find a significant difference between the two groups in the likelihood of becoming a sex offender. These findings must also be interpreted with caution, however, because no-difference findings are sometimes attributable to comparing small samples rather than to a real absence of difference between groups.

Table 2: Results From the Research of Williams and Colleagues on the Cycle of Sexual Abuse

Outcome variable	"Official" victim sample (N = 50)	"Official" comparison sample (N = 56)	All sexual abuse victims (both samples) (N = 69)	Nonvictims in comparison sample (N = 33)
Arrested for sex offense[a]	14%	13%	16%	6%
Self-reported sex offense[b]	14	14	13	15
Any sex offense[c]	26	20	24	18

[a]Includes any arrest for a sex offense as a juvenile or as an adult. Sex offenses included rape, involuntary deviate sexual intercourse, sexual assault, indecent assault, indecent exposure, and incest.

[b]Includes all individuals who self-reported having committed a sex offense, whether they were arrested for the offense or not. Study group members were asked to report on any initiation or occurrence of sexual contact with children under the age of 12 and any sexual contact with adolescents or adults when physical force, threats of force, or the coercion of adult or supervisory authority was used to achieve the sexual contact.

[c]Includes all individuals who were arrested for a sex offense and those who were not arrested but who self-reported sex offenses.

Source: L. M. Williams et al., 1995.

The generalizability of these findings may be limited since the sample of sexually abused boys (and the matched comparison group) is neither a random sample nor a sample that is representative of the general population of children at risk of such abuse. Over 80 percent of the boys sampled were African-American, and a disproportionate number of the men who were interviewed were from poor families and had criminal records. About one-third of the interviewed men who were sexually abused as boys, and about one-fifth of all of the men interviewed, were incarcerated at the time of interview.

The Williams et al. study is instructive in that it points to a number of difficulties involved in conducting prospective studies of the relationship between childhood victimization and adult offending. These difficulties include (1) the need to determine whether members of comparison groups

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were victims of sexual abuse, and (2) the need to employ more than a single outcome measure of offending. Of 15 men who self-reported any sex offense, only 5 had an arrest record for a sex offense; and of 14 men who had been arrested for a sex offense, only 5 self-reported a sex-offending behavior.

Conclusions

A number of studies have been done on the cycle of sexual abuse, many of which were reviewed in this report. Most of the studies were retrospective in design; that is, they began with a sample of known sex offenders of children and sought to determine whether they were sexually abused during childhood. The chief limitation of the retrospective studies is that studying a known group of sexual offenders cannot provide any direct information about the extent to which children who are sexually abused become sexual offender as adults. The two studies we reviewed that were prospective in design attempted to overcome this limitation by identifying samples of sexually victimized children and tracking them into adulthood to determine how many became sex offenders. These studies also had limitations, which made it difficult to reach any definitive conclusions about the cycle of sexual abuse. However, in spite of their limitations, overall, the retrospective studies, prospective studies, and research reviews did indicate that the experience of childhood sexual victimization is quite likely neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause of adult sexual offending. Further research would be necessary to determine what kinds of experiences magnify the likelihood that sexually victimized children will become adult sexual offenders against children and, alternatively, what kinds of experiences help prevent victimized children from becoming adult sexual offenders against children.

We are sending copies of this report to the Ranking Minority Member of the House Subcommittee on Crime and the Chairman and Ranking Minority Member of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary. Copies will also be made available to others upon request.

The major contributors to this report are listed in appendix II. Please call me at (202) 512-8777 if you have any questions about this report.

Sincerely yours,

Laurie E. Ekstrand

Laurie E. Ekstrand
Associate Director, Administration
of Justice Issues

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Appendix I

Retrospective Studies of Adult Sex Offenders of Children

Study	Study group(s)[a]	Percent abused[b]
Alford et al., 1988	50 imprisoned child sex offenders	35%
	14 child sex offenders admitted to a psychiatric hospital	50
Baker, 1985	20 incestuous fathers	45
Ballard et al., 1990[c]	383 incest offenders classified into two institutional (a,b) and two community-based (c,d) settings:	54
	(a) 63 in prison	65
	(b) 41 in mental health facilities	61
	(c) 240 in Parents United[d]	50
	(d) 39 in private practice	49
Bard et al., 1987	68 child molesters	57

Comparison group(s)[c]	Percent abused[b]	Comments
None	Not applicable	This study reports the percentages of two groups of child sex offenders who reported, in clinical interviews, having been involved sexually, as a child, with a person 5 or more years older than themselves. The authors offer no definitive conclusions about whether being abused leads to becoming an abuser, but do note that the sex offenders commonly were victims, and that the abuse was commonly done by women.
20 nonincestuous fathers	5%	This study compares incestuous fathers recruited through Parents United,[a] and a group of nonincestuous fathers in therapy for reasons other than sexual abuse. The primary focus of the study involves whether incestuous fathers differ from nonincestuous fathers in terms of parental rejection, adult nurturance, and the perception of adult females as sexually threatening. As regards the history of abuse, incestuous fathers were found to be more likely than nonincestuous fathers to have been involved in incestuous relationships in their own childhoods, although in some cases the father initiated that relationship. No other information on history of abuse is offered.
None	Not applicable	This study looks at differences between incest offenders in institutional settings and community-based settings on a number of characteristics, and is primarily concerned with the levels of social skills in the different groups. Sizable percentages of all groups are shown to have been sexually abused as children, although no comparison group is employed and no general conclusions about the cycle of sexual abuse are offered.
107 rapists	23	These results were offered as part of a larger study that examined differences between rapists and child molesters on a number of dimensions. Study and comparison samples were drawn from patients in the Massachusetts Treatment Center for Sexually Dangerous Persons. No firm conclusions were drawn about the cycle of sexual abuse.

(continued)

Study	Study group(s)[a]	Percent abused[b]
Bennett, 1985	34 incestuous fathers or father-surrogates	38%
Condy et al., 1987	92 convicted child molesters	37
Dhawan and Marshall, 1996	16 incarcerated child molesters	50
Dutton and Hart, 1992	Incarcerated men grouped as follows:	
	(a) 107 sexual violence/strangers	22
	(b) 52 sexual violence/family	30

Comparison group(s)[c]	Percent abused[b]	Comments
18 nonincestuous fathers	6%	This unpublished dissertation compared incestuous fathers participating in a treatment program with a "normal" nonincestuous comparison group of fathers on childhood and adolescent experience of sexual abuse and on five aspects of cognitive style. Ten of 26 (38 percent) incestuous fathers for whom data were available reported experiencing sexual abuse as children or adolescents, compared to one of 18 (6 percent) nonincestuous fathers. The author concluded that sexual victimization may predispose men to sexual abuse in adulthood, but that victimization is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for becoming an offender.
65 convicted rapists 55 inmates convicted of nonsexual crimes 359 college men	57 47 16	This study reports the percentages of male inmates convicted of different offenses, as well as of the college men, who reported having been sexually involved, before the age of 16, with a woman or girl who was at least 5 years older and at least 16 years of age. Sexual involvement was higher for all of the inmate groups than for the group of college men, although it is noted that only a small minority of cases involved force, and that in a large proportion of the cases males initiated the activity.
29 incarcerated rapists 20 incarcerated nonsexual offenders	62 20	This study obtained data from child molesters, rapists, and nonsexual offenders serving time in two medium-security penitentiaries. The three groups self-reported whether they had ever been sexually abused, whether the abuse involved bodily contact or not (noncontact abuse included solicitations and exhibitionism), whether the perpetrator was a family member or stranger, and how upsetting it was. The authors found that the two groups of sex offenders were more likely to have been abused than were the nonsexual offenders, and concluded that sexual abuse, coupled with other family background characteristics (i.e., poorer relations, less support, more physical abuse) may be importantly related to becoming a sex offender.
Incarcerated men, grouped as follows: (c) 239 physical violence/strangers (d) 123 physical violence/family (e) 77 no violence	 4 12 13	As part of a broader study of the impact of various types of childhood abuse and neglect on violent and aggressive behavior in adulthood, data were provided on the history of sexual abuse among incarcerated males, classified according to whether they had committed acts of physical or sexual violence directed towards strangers or family members. Prisoners who had committed sexual acts of violence were more likely to have been the victims of childhood sexual abuse than were other prisoners. In this study, it is not clear how many of the perpetrators of sex crimes were child molesters.

(continued)

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Study	Study group(s)[a]	Percent abused[b]
Faller, 1989	154 sexually abusive fathers, stepfathers, or live-in boyfriends	27%
Frisbie, 1969	311 child molesters	24
Gaffney et al., 1984	33 pedophiles[c]	27
Gebhard et al., 1965	Includes 8 nonmutually exclusive groups of sex offenders:	
	199 heterosexual offenders vs. children	10 (F) 24 (M)
	174 heterosexual offenders vs. minors	16 (F) 14 (M)
	25 heterosexual aggressors vs. children	11 (F) 16 (M)
	27 heterosexual aggressors vs. minors	4 (F) 30 (M)
	56 incest offenders vs. children	8 (F) 19 (M)
	66 incest offenders vs. minors	6 (F) 13 (M)
	96 homosexual offenders vs. children	8 (F) 32 (M)
	136 homosexual offenders vs. minors	6 (F) 35 (M)

Comparison group(s)[c]	Percent abused[b]	Comments
154 mothers of sexual abuse victims	50%	This study examined whether offenders in intrafamilial sexual abuse cases referred to the Michigan Interdisciplinary Project on Child Abuse and Neglect, and the mothers of the victims of the offender's abuse, had any history of sexual abuse in the families of origin. Data on sexual abuse history were available for 116 of the 154 offenders, and for 130 of the 154 mothers. Of the offenders, 53 percent had experienced sexual abuse in their families of origin, and 27 percent had been the direct victims of such abuse. The corresponding percentages for the mothers were 58 percent and 50 percent, respectively.
None	Not applicable	As part of a larger study of sex offenders in the state of California, interviews were conducted with 311 subjects who had sexually abused minors under age 14. Lacking a comparison group, no firm conclusions were offered about the cycle of sexual abuse, but the study reports that predominately heterosexual child molesters were less likely to have been abused as children than predominately homosexual ones (15 percent versus 66 percent).
21 nonpedophilic paraphiliacs[g] 33 depressed nonparaphiliacs	14 Not reported	Subjects of this study were inpatients at Johns Hopkins Biosexual Psychohormonal Clinic. Pedophiliacs were found to be more likely than others to have pedophiliac family members, although they did not differ significantly from other paraphiliacs in terms of having been abused as children. No information on childhood abuse was presented for those in the comparison group.
Includes 8 nonmutually exclusive groups of sex offenders, one group of nonsexual offenders, and one group of men who were not incarcerated. 217 heterosexual offenders vs. adults 140 heterosexual aggressors vs. adults 25 incest offenders vs. adults 199 homosexual offenders vs. adults 56 peepers 135 exhibitionists 888 incarcerated nonsexual offenders 477 nonincarcerated men	 9 (F) 21 (M) 10 (F) 23 (M) 0 (F) 13 (M) 4 (F) 33 (M) 3 (F) 24 (M) 12 (F) 17 (M) 10 (F) 31 (M) 3 (F) 8 (M)	This early and broad study of different types of sex offenders provides data on prepubertal heterosexual and homosexual activity on 14 types of sex offenders (most of whom were incarcerated at the time of the study), on incarcerated nonsexual offenders, and on a rather haphazardly drawn comparison group of nonincarcerated men. Such activity is not strictly limited to experiences of abuse; it includes not only physical contact, but also being solicited by adult males or females by words, gestures, or other sexual approach. All of the subjects in the study were men, and the numbers to the left indicate the percentages whose prepubertal sexual contact involved adult females (F) and males (M). The study found there was more contact with adult males than adult females for all but one of these various groups, and while sex offenders were not always more likely than incarcerated nonsexual offenders to have been involved sexually, as children, with adults, all groups showed greater homosexual involvement than the nonincarcerated comparison group.

(continued)

Study	Study group(s)[a]	Percent abused[b]
Greenberg et al., 1993	135 pedophilic child molesters[c] 43 hebephilic child molesters[c]	42% 44
Groff and Hubble, 1984	16 incestuous fathers and 26 incestuous stepfathers	5
Groth, 1979	178 child molesters	31
Kirkland and Bauer, 1982	10 incestuous fathers	10
Langevin and Lang, 1985	29 heterosexual pedophiles[c] 22 homosexual pedophiles[c]	21-24 14-19

Comparison group(s)[c]	Percent abused[b]	Comments
None	Not applicable	This study compared histories of childhood sexual victimization among pedophilic and hebephilic child molesters. The former differ from the latter on the basis of molesting younger children (i.e., 12 or under). Similar percentages of the two groups, drawn from patients seen at a sexual behaviors clinic, reported a history of having sexual contact with an adult while under the age of 13. Among hebephiles, homosexuals were more likely than heterosexuals to report such contact, but no difference by sexual orientation was found among pedophiles.
None	Not applicable	The only information provided on the cycle of sexual abuse in this study, which finds few differences between fathers and stepfathers convicted of incest, is that, in the two groups combined, only 2 of the 42 subjects had been abused as children.
170 rapists 62 law enforcement officers	29% 3	This study reports the percentages of subjects in each group that experienced sexual trauma as children, which can include witnessing sexual activity. The percentages of child molesters and rapists reported to have been the victims of forcible sexual assault as children were 22 percent and 5 percent, respectively. Sexual assaults of the comparison group of law enforcement officers were not reported. While this group is of questionable comparability to the offenders, and the information on victimization experiences was collected differently for them, the authors conclude that there is a link between being abused and becoming an offender.
12 individuals matched on various characteristics	Not reported	In this study, which focuses primarily on whether incestuous fathers differ from a matched comparison group in terms of personality disorders, 1 of the 10 incestuous fathers reported a history of incest in his own childhood. No comparable information was given for the comparison group, and no additional information on victimization was offered for either group.
160 sexually anomalous men 54 individuals matched on various characteristics	21-29 15-19	This study reports the percentages in each group who, at age 12 or younger, had "sex play" with boys or girls who were 4 or 5 years older, or with men or women. The ranges in percents result from possible overlap; i.e., 21 percent of the heterosexual pedophiles had sex with older girls or women, and 3 percent had sex with older boys, so between 21 and 24 percent had sex with older boys or girls or with men or women. While it is not known whether any of this sex play was coercive, the authors conclude that sexual abuse, by itself, does not account for why people later become pedophiles.

(continued)

Study	Study group(s)[a]	Percent abused[b]
Lee, 1982	39 sexually abusive fathers, stepfathers, or surrogate fathers	0%
McCarty, 1986	26 mothers who were incest offenders	76
Overholser and Beck, 1989	12 convicted child molesters	58
Seghorn et al., 1987	54 child molesters	57
Tingle et al., 1986	43 child molesters	56

Comparison group(s)[c]	Percent abused[b]	Comments
39 physically abusive fathers, stepfathers, or surrogate fathers	0%	This unpublished dissertation describes differences between a sample of fathers and stepfathers who had sexually abused their daughters and stepdaughters, and fathers, stepfathers, and surrogate fathers who had physically abused their sons or daughters. In these small samples, few differences between groups were found. No subjects in either group reported having been sexually abused as children.
None	Not applicable	This study's primary focus is on differences between incestuous mothers who were independent offenders, co-offenders (with a male accomplice), and accomplices, in terms of such characteristics as intelligence, employment, marital history, drug use, and emotional disturbance. Childhood information was available for 17 of these mothers, and 13 (76 percent) reported childhood sexual victimization.
12 convicted rapists 36 men who were either nonsexual offenders or nonoffenders: (a) 12 inmates convicted of nonsexual offenses (b) 12 low socioeconomic status volunteers (c) 12 college students with minimal dating experience	25 6	This study was primarily concerned with how well behavioral and life history data could be used to classify (or distinguish) different groups of offenders and nonoffenders. The authors report, independent of the classification analyses, that the two groups of sex offenders were more likely than the three groups of nonsexual offenders and nonoffenders to have been sexually abused as children (i.e., forced to engage in coercive sexual activity before the age of 13). The 6 percent reported for the nonsexual offenders and nonoffenders is for all three groups combined; percentages were not reported for each of these groups separately.
97 rapists	23	This study compared child molesters and rapists residing in the Massachusetts Treatment Center for Sexually Dangerous Persons in 1982, and found the former more likely to have been victims of sexual assault as children. It concludes that sexual abuse results from the global pathology of families of the abused, and that sexual victimization as a child is more contributory to becoming a child molester than a rapist.
21 rapists	38	This descriptive study of convicted rapists and child molesters who were seen at a Florida treatment center reports characteristics that distinguish the two groups, i.e., rapists were more aggressive and violent in their childhoods. The authors did not find, however, significant differences between the groups in their histories of sexual abuse.

(continued)

Study	Study group(s)[a]	Percent abused[b]
Williams and Finkelhor, 1992	55 incestuous fathers in the Navy	64%
	63 civilian incestuous fathers	79

Comparison group(s)[c]	Percent abused[b]	Comments
53 nonincestuous fathers in the Navy 63 civilian nonincestuous fathers	21% 41	This preliminary, descriptive analysis compared incestuous and nonincestuous fathers from U.S. Navy and civilian samples, the fathers having been matched on age, age of daughter, education, and occupation. In both samples, incestuous fathers were more likely than nonincestuous fathers to have reported being sexually abused as children, although the report does not make clear what types of victimization experiences were elicited by interviews with the subject. The authors conclude that sexual victimization is related to incestuous abuse of daughters.

Note: F = female, M = male.

[a]Study groups included individuals who had perpetrated sexual abuse against children.

[b]The percent abused represents the percentage of the study groups or the comparison groups who were sexually abused as children. The studies varied in how they defined and measured sexual abuse. (See report text and comments in the last column of this table.)

[c]Comparison groups included individuals who had perpetrated sexual crimes against adults (e.g., rapists), individuals who had committed nonsexual crimes, or nonoffenders who might or might not be matched with the study group.

[d]Parents United is a support group that emphasizes and promotes the reunification of the incest family.

[e]Study included both male and female offenders.

[f]Pedophiles (or pedophilic child molesters, or pedophiliacs) are sexual deviants whose preferred sexual objects are children.

[g]Paraphiliacs (or nonpedophilic paraphiliacs) are sexual deviants whose deviant behavior does not involve children. In this study, they included primarily exhibitionists and sadists.

[h]As defined in this study, hebephiles (or hebephilic child molesters) were child molesters who admitted to coerced sexual activity with extrafamilial children between the ages of 13 and 16.

[i]As defined in this study, sexually anomalous men were sex offenders who were nonpedophilic and preferred mature partners.

Major Contributors to This Report

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